



‘An Epidemic Within a Pandemic’: Local Gun Violence Prevention Efforts in Pennsylvania During COVID-19

Lessons Learned from PCCD’s FY 2018-2019 Gun Violence Grantees

PENNSYLVANIA COMMISSION ON CRIME & DELINQUENCY, OFFICE OF JUSTICE
PROGRAMS, UNIT OF GUN VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Table of Contents

I. Context: Gun Violence During COVID-19	2
II. Background: PCCD’s Investments in Local Gun Violence Prevention Efforts.....	3
III. Summary: 2019 PCCD Gun Violence Reduction Grants by Type	4
IV. Context: Firearm-Related Homicides, Assaults, and Robberies in Municipalities Receiving FY 2019 Gun Violence Reduction Grants.....	5
Figure 1. Gun Homicides by Quarter, Select Gun Violence Grantees, 2019-2020	5
Figure 2. Assaults with Firearms by Quarter, Select Gun Violence Grantees, 2019-2020	5
Figure 3. Robberies with Firearms by Quarter, Select Gun Violence Grantees, 2019-2020	6
V. Highlights: Impact of Communities’ Efforts to Date.....	7
VI. Common Challenges: Navigating the Intersections of Two Public Health Crises.....	9
VII. Lessons Learned: Identifying & Implementing Community-based Solutions to Gun Violence.....	10
APPENDIX A: Promising Gun Violence Prevention Models	12
Figure 4. Elements of Cure Violence vs. Focused Deterrence.....	12
Figure 5. Public Safety/Law Enforcement vs. Public Health Approach.....	12

I. **Context: Gun Violence During COVID-19**

Preliminary data indicates 2020 was a record-breaking year for gun-related deaths in the United States, and in Pennsylvania.¹ Nationally, an estimated 20,000 Americans died from gun homicides, unintentional shootings, police-involved shootings, and assaults in 2020; an additional 24,000 people died by suicide with a firearm.² In Pennsylvania, there were an estimated 784 firearm-related murders (up from 621 in 2019), 2,575 shootings (up from 1,840 in 2019), and 34 mass shootings (up from 19 in 2019) statewide in 2020, according to the *Gun Violence Archive* database. In the City of Philadelphia, homicides increased by 40% in 2020 compared with 2019, resulting in the second highest number of killings in the past 60 years.³ In addition, more than 2,240 people were shot – the highest number the Philadelphia Police Department has recorded since they started tracking shooting victims in 2007.⁴

Unfortunately, Philadelphia isn't the only major city experiencing these dramatic increases in homicides. A [recent report](#) published by the Council on Criminal Justice examining homicides and violent crime data from 34 U.S. cities found that homicide rates rose sharply compared with 2019, along with significant increases in the rates of aggravated assaults and gun assault rates.⁵ A snapshot of 12 cities also indicates increases in domestic violence, especially in the early months of the pandemic.⁶ This historic surge in gun violence occurred while the country was grappling with the devastation of a global pandemic – which took the heaviest toll on communities of color – and during a moment of racial reckoning.⁷

Gun Violence in Pennsylvania: Data Snapshot

- According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there were 1,541 firearm-related fatalities in Pennsylvania in 2019.⁸
- Guns are used in the vast majority of homicides in Pennsylvania (77% in 2019).⁹ Firearms also play a role in other violent crimes, such as robbery and aggravated assault.
- Interpersonal gun violence disproportionately affects people and communities of color.
 - According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 67.5% of gun homicide victims were Black, even though they represent just 12% of Pennsylvania's population.
 - Data from the CDC also indicates that Black and Hispanic/Latinx people are more likely to be murdered using firearms compared with Whites (23x and 7x, respectively).

II. Background: PCCD's Investments in Local Gun Violence Prevention Efforts

Since 2018, the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD) has released \$3.7 million in state Reducing Gun Violence Grant Program funding to 11 municipalities across the Commonwealth. In FY 2020-21, PCCD prioritized Community Violence Prevention/Reduction funding through its School Safety and Security Fund to support projects addressing gun violence throughout Pennsylvania (approximately \$3.1 million).

To understand how the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted local gun violence prevention efforts, between December 2020 and January 2021, PCCD staff met virtually with nine out of 11 Gun Violence Reduction grantees. These conversations were also designed to gather information about the different strategies they have put in place using state funding to prevent shootings, homicides, and other firearm-related crime in their communities. Grantees shared success stories as well as “lessons learned” from their efforts to curb gun violence using a variety of models and programs, including the adaptations made in light of the COVID-19 crisis.

This report highlights common themes and promising practices gleaned from those conversations, including impacts to date, common challenges, “lessons learned,” and areas for additional support and assistance identified by grantees.

III. Summary: 2019 PCCD Gun Violence Reduction Grants by Type

Funding supported implementation of specific models/strategies (Operation Ceasefire, Cure Violence Health Model, county gun violence task force) or “other strategies that result in the reduction of gun violence and increased safety in communities.” (NOTE: Appendix A includes a summary of “Promising Gun Violence Prevention Models,” including an overview of public safety/focused deterrence vs. public health/norm change approaches.)

PUBLIC HEALTH / CURE VIOLENCE	PUBLIC SAFETY / FOCUSED DETERRENCE	GUN VIOLENCE TASK FORCE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allegheny County – <i>Cure Model</i> • Allentown City – <i>Zero Youth Violence Program</i> • City of Chester (Temple University) – <i>Cure Chester Gun Violence Reduction Project</i> • Johnstown City – <i>Cure Violence</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City of McKeesport – <i>McKeesport Alternative Policing Strategies (MAPS) & McKeesport Gun Violence Reduction Program</i> • Erie County – <i>Erie Gun Working Group (EGWG) / Operation Ceasefire (focused deterrence)</i> • York City – <i>Group Violence Intervention (GVI) focused on hot spots policing, fatal and nonfatal shooting investigation/response</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delaware County – <i>Anti-Violence Strike Force</i> • Luzerne County – <i>Gun Violence Reduction Task Force & Trigger Lock Operations (hot spot policing)</i>
<p style="text-align: center;">HYBRID APPROACH: Models Spanning Public Health and Public Safety:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City of Philadelphia – <i>Community Crisis Intervention Program (CCIP)</i> • City of Pittsburgh – <i>GVI model</i> 		

IV. Context: Firearm-Related Homicides, Assaults, and Robberies in Municipalities Receiving FY 2019 Gun Violence Reduction Grants

As part of quarterly program data reporting, Gun Violence Reduction grantees were asked to provide updates regarding the number of firearm-related homicides, assaults, and robberies taking place within their municipality or county. A snapshot of this data is presented below for sites able to consistently track/report crime data.

Figure 1. Gun Homicides by Quarter, Select Gun Violence Grantees, 2019-2020¹⁰

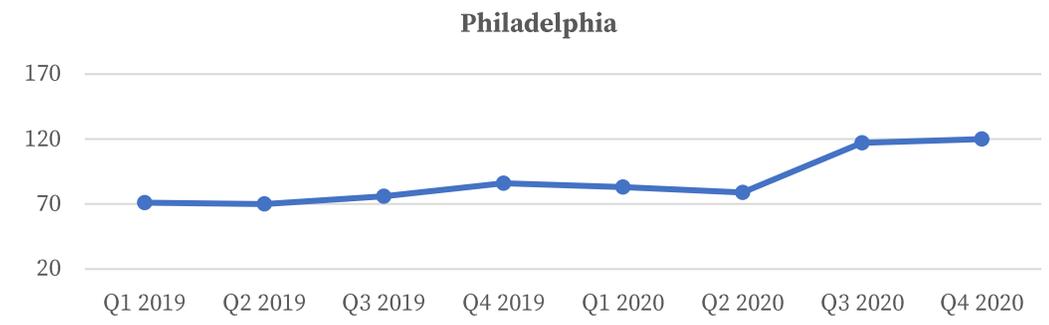
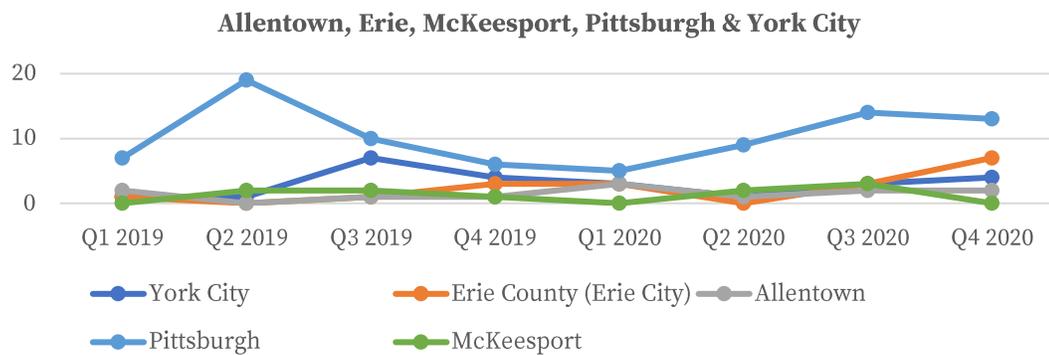
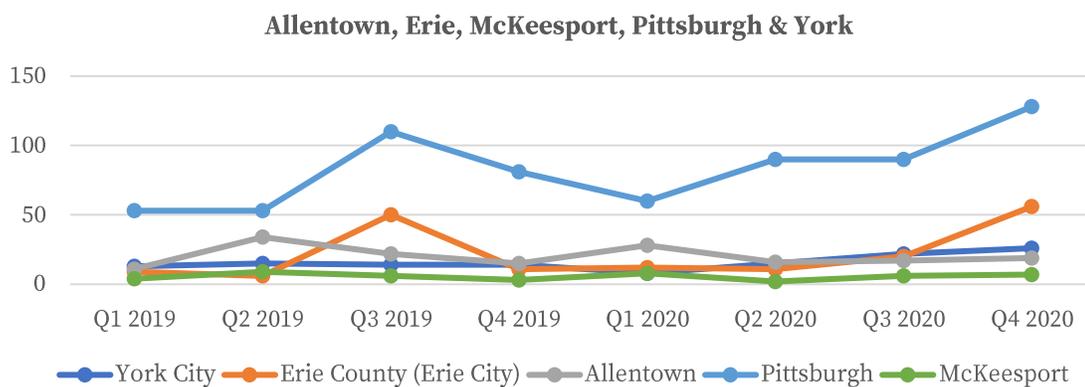


Figure 2. Assaults with Firearms by Quarter, Select Gun Violence Grantees, 2019-2020¹¹



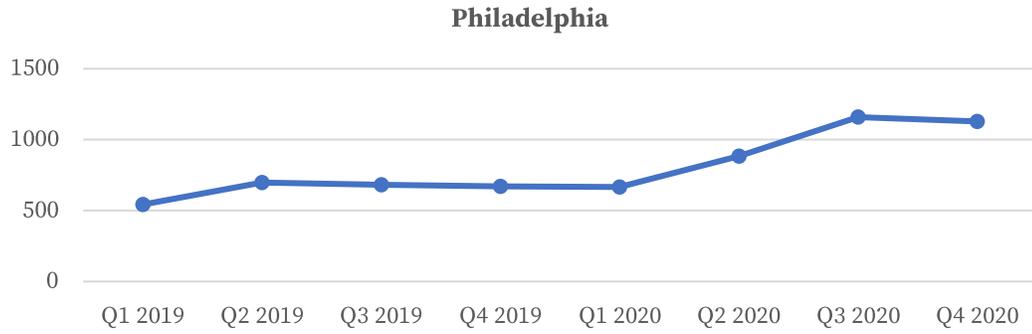
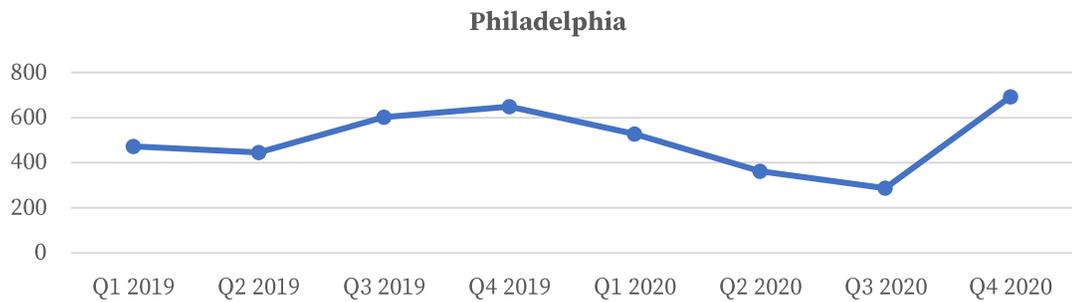
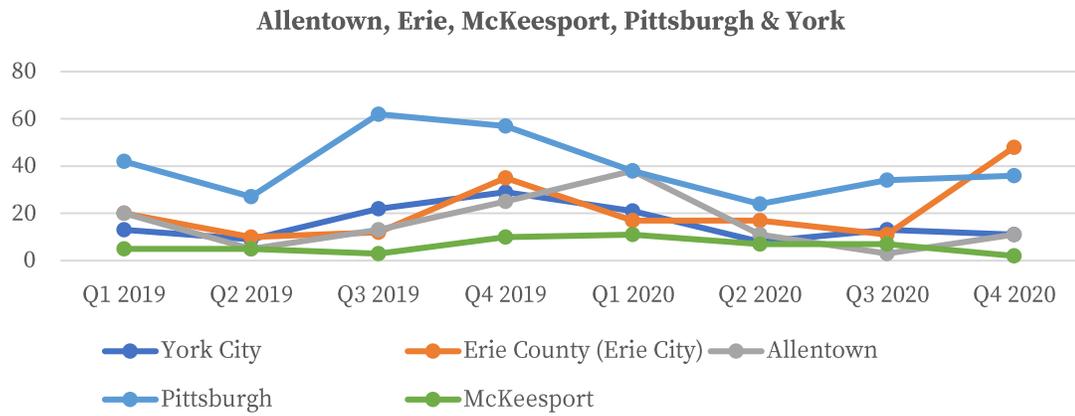


Figure 3. Robberies with Firearms by Quarter, Select Gun Violence Grantees, 2019-2020¹²



V. Highlights: Impact of Communities' Efforts to Date

- **PUBLIC HEALTH Allegheny County's** award from PCCD has accelerated local efforts to reduce gun violence. Previously, the county had received private funding from foundations, but because the funding was limited and county-wide, momentum and capacity were both restricted. Increased resources provided through state dollars coupled with a more targeted program focus (Wilkesburg) helped advance these efforts. Based on the work that was done at the adult level using *Gun Violence Reduction* funding from PCCD, Allegheny County Health Department was able to successfully apply for federal funds to advance the Cure Violence model for youth in Wilkesburg.
- **PUBLIC HEALTH Allentown** reported a 19% reduction in violent crime citywide since the start of Cure Violence program activities, as well as increased engagement with gangs. As one staff member shared, "There's been tremendous progress in creating spaces where people can talk and not shoot." During the COVID-19 pandemic, the program has also helped coordinate distribution of essential goods, such as diapers, fresh fruits and vegetables, etc., for community members. Zero Youth Violence (a grantee partner) brought together members of Latin Kings, Crips, and Bloods to assist in these efforts. The program also launched a phone bank during the pandemic operated by members of the Latin Kings to help Spanish-speaking residents connect with city services and supports.
- **PUBLIC SAFETY** Through its Erie Gun Working Group (EGWG) and Operation Ceasefire (focused deterrence) efforts, **Erie County** reported increased seizures of firearms as well as increases in gun-related arrests. In the last quarter of 2020, Erie County reported seizing 29 firearms – an increase from prior quarters. Officials have also used PCCD funding to purchase new technology (phones) allowing law enforcement to monitor social media, supporting "real-time" interventions for gang activity and gun-related issues. Members of Erie's grant team also reported early success in mixing and matching individuals from different agencies (i.e., probation officer with police officer) to leverage different expertise and improve access to information and record-sharing. However, COVID-19 disrupted this practice as it forced officers to drive separately in different vehicles; limited opportunities for multiple agencies to "ride together" to interviews and on-scene work. As operations begin to return to "normal," the county plans to resume this process.
- **TASK FORCE Luzerne County's** Gun Violence Task Force model focused on Pennsylvania's background check process via the Pennsylvania Information Check System (PICS) as a central intervention point. Luzerne has moved from a process that was largely decentralized and based on local jurisdictions (i.e., Sheriff's Office) toward a more centralized approach where the District Attorney's Office serves as the primary administrator/point of contact for PICS/background check system. County officials and law enforcement work closely with the Pennsylvania State Police (PSP) in administration and enforcement of that program. The Luzerne County DA's Office also highlighted their working relationships with the Pennsylvania Office of Attorney General on their Gun Violence Task Force, Track + Trace initiative, and other efforts to address gun trafficking and increase participation of gun shops. Members of Luzerne's grant team noted that, in just the first month of 2021, there had already been seven arrests for M-3 violations (falsifying information as part of a background check). These incidents have spurred investigations for firearm-related offenses as well as drug-related offenses (working coordination with Luzerne County's Drug Task Force).

- **PUBLIC SAFETY** **The City of McKeesport's** grant team shared that their gun violence reduction efforts are rooted in strong community relationships and trust. Police officers in McKeesport are required to live in the city, so law enforcement is really involved in the community, especially engaging youth, and have embraced the idea of community policing and building trust among police and the people they serve. That strong sense of community and commitment has helped support their gun violence prevention program because, as one team member put it, "there's already trust and relationships in place."

"Our success is that I haven't had to attend a funeral this year." – Keith Murphy, Executive Director of Healthy Village Learning Institute, City of McKeesport

- **HYBRID APPROACH** **Pittsburgh** used PCCD funding to develop new tools and strategies to maintain connections and outreach during 2020. This included moving from in-person interactions to virtual communications through a ***new, innovative case management app*** developed in partnership with students at Carnegie Mellon University. The app allows Outreach Workers to view and share resources with clients in real time and confirms if/when access to those resources occurs. This information can help inform follow-up from Outreach Workers to a client (i.e., "If you used the resource, was it helpful?"; "If you didn't access the resource, is there a different service or group that might be a better fit?"). The app's source code is posted on GitHub and can be made available to other communities to use, modify, and build on for their own needs.
- **PUBLIC SAFETY** **York City** reported an increase in willingness of witnesses to testify, leading to a 70% clearance rate for homicides – significantly higher than the national average.

"Enforcement, investigation, and crime response efforts are powerful and significant – next step is matching those efforts with outreach and prevention side." – York City Gun Violence Grant Team Member

VI. Common Challenges: Navigating the Intersections of Two Public Health Crises

- **The pandemic and resulting social distancing measures upended many traditional approaches to gun violence prevention and intervention, forcing communities to adjust and adapt.** COVID-19 created significant implementation challenges for all FY 2019 Gun Violence Grant Program sites and was especially disruptive for intervention efforts focused on engaging youth and schools. Participants noted challenges implementing post-shooting interventions early in the pandemic due to restrictions on visits in settings like hospitals and jails. Grantees also reported difficulty maintaining collaboration and community-based partnerships in a socially distanced environment.
- **COVID-19 catalyzed factors associated with increases in crime, including homicide and interpersonal violence,** such as historic/systemic racial and economic disparities, reduced or modified behavioral health services (e.g., telehealth) leading to changes in treatment, and stay-at-home orders increasing opportunities for domestic violence. As one grantee shared, “There was an expectation that COVID-19 would lead to less violence, fewer shootings – but the opposite happened.”
- **It’s difficult to “prove a negative” when it comes to gun violence prevention models.** Across the public health and public safety spectrum, grantees shared, with frustration, that it is often difficult to demonstrate outcomes of their prevention efforts. One team member from a grantee site noted, “It’s difficult to know how many shootings we’ve prevented based on GVI activities,” and another shared that the “impact of the program is challenging to discern unless you were to remove the program altogether.” In addition, the quarterly performance measures PCCD required as part of the Gun Violence Reduction Grant Program were not necessarily perceived as universally relevant for different models (e.g., Task Force models focus on gun seizures, gun-related arrests, not just firearm-related crime). Several grantees suggested that PCCD revisit the “standard/universal” performance measures the agency collects as well as custom, grantee-specific metrics.
- **Outreach in response to shootings and other incidents is an important and effective strategy, but it comes with unique and less predictable expenditures.** York City reported that when there is a shooting that occurs in the community, grant-funded partners immediately reach out to intervene and offer critical supports (i.e., “We want you safe, alive, and out of jail – what do you need?”). These interventions and supports often involve less straightforward expenses, such as hotel costs to stay out of town, covering the costs of a coffin for the funeral of a loved one, etc., than those traditionally associated with state grant funding, such as personnel, supplies, etc.). To address that issue, York City Police Department sub-awarded funds to Life Path Ministries to cover immediate short-term expenses and get people the support they need ASAP.
- **Sustainability is challenging.** The majority of Gun Violence Reduction Grantees reported that, without state funding, it would be difficult or impossible for their efforts/programs to continue..

VII. **Lessons Learned: Identifying & Implementing Community-based Solutions to Gun Violence**

- **Relationships matter.** Many grantees shared the importance of partnerships to their gun violence reduction efforts, regardless of the model or type of initiative being implemented. In some cases, grantees reported slower starts to project activities to provide sufficient space for building relationships with key stakeholders in the community. As one grantee noted, “It’s important to get buy-in from political leaders as well as lead agencies (e.g., police departments, mayor’s offices, district attorneys, probation and parole, etc.). Without buy-in, programs don’t work.” To create that buy-in, grantees talked about the importance of bringing community leaders to the table early in the process to help shape the program, inform its roll-out, take ownership, etc. As an added benefit, connecting with grassroots neighborhood- and community-based organizations, especially faith leaders, also helps to “spread the word” about gun violence prevention strategies and how community members can contribute and assist.

***Case Study/Example:** Temple University reported significant progress in building relationships and partnerships within the City of Chester during the project period. University staff and local project partners shared that there was a concerted effort to identify individuals in Chester City who could support the initiative who were already deeply involved in youth engagement, community-based efforts, and violence prevention, including the Boys and Girls Club of Chester, the Chester Community Coalition, and ministry groups. The program also tapped into local healthcare and hospital networks, including the Crozer-Chester Hospital System, as critical partners. Other important partners/stakeholders included state and local political leaders, first responders (ambulance, EMS, emergency rooms, fire dept.), and education institutions. Looking ahead, Temple University is working with Crozer-Chester to develop a hospital-based intervention component to their program, providing outreach and supports for shooting victims in the city.*

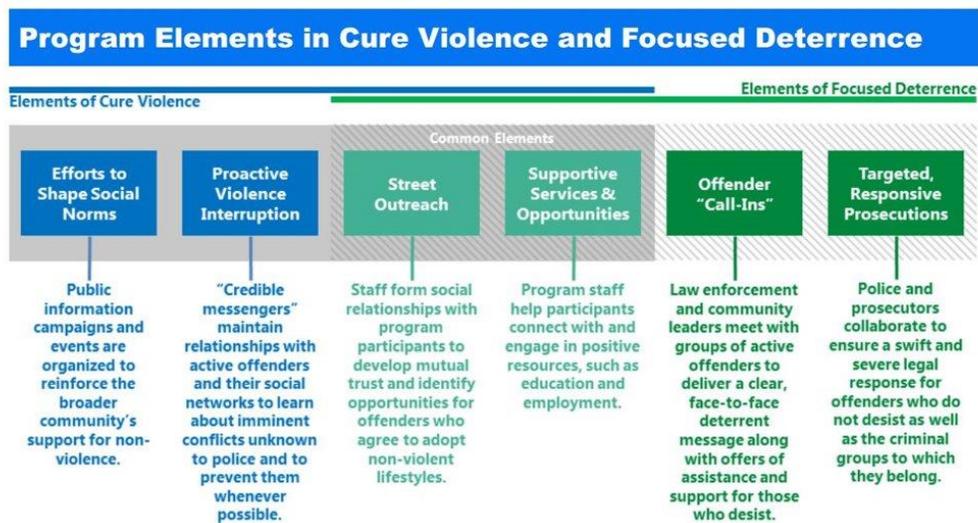
- **Engaging people and organizations supporting and serving youth.** Many grantees reported challenges providing youth with opportunities to have positive experiences, whether due to COVID-19 impacts, cuts in education funding, and/or limited opportunities for out-of-school time activities. Grantees with youth-focused prevention and intervention strategies talked about the importance of engaging trusted adults who can identify red flags and take steps to intervene when they are concerned, especially parents/guardians and families. COVID-19 significantly disrupted many youth-focused initiatives planned by grantees, especially as schools were closed for in-person instruction in spring 2020 and subsequent months. As one grantee noted, the challenges currently facing youth are “unprecedented,” making a focus on supporting youth and providing positive experiences more crucial than ever.
- **Finding the right “credible messengers” is critical – and often challenging – work.** One grantee noted that the goal of their Gun Violence Reduction program was initially to identify and onboard credible messengers to launch activities right away. As a team member put it, “That didn’t play out as expected.” Many sites incorporating street outreach workers or “Violence Interrupters” shared that the vetting process was really crucial to make sure that individuals were truly “credible” among the individuals and groups the program was trying to reach.

- **Document, inventory, and disseminate promising practices and effective models:** Most grantees reported interest in accessing an “inventory” of evidence-based programs, promising practices, and common interventions (e.g., gun buyback programs). One grantee recommended that PCCD develop an online resource center where individuals can pull down information and learn more about specific types of models, including programs that have been funded through the Gun Violence Reduction Program in Pennsylvania. Grantees also expressed a desire for accessing no-cost training and professional development opportunities. “There’s always a need for more training.” Potential topics identified by staff at program sites included search and seizure (laws continually change), forfeitures, cross-system collaboration (i.e., reducing perceived “competition” among groups active in violence prevention, intervention, and response, etc.). Many grantees reported strong institutional/organizational partnerships, but difficulty building momentum and trust within the community itself (grassroots outreach); training and technical assistance focused on community coalition building could help address that gap.
- **Break down silos between public health and public safety/law enforcement approaches to violence prevention and reduction:** One grantee shared “there’s a silo between public health and law enforcement approaches to violence prevention and reduction.” These models often come with their own “language” – different terminology, program elements, performance measures, etc. In this schema, similar intervention strategies sometimes carry a variety of names (e.g., “credible messengers,” “violence interrupters,” “outreach workers”). But these contrasts often run deeper than just language. Models also vary in the extent to which law enforcement are involved in program activities. In some approaches, such as GVI or focused deterrence, police, probation and parole officers, and other justice practitioners play a central and leading role in interventions. More public health-centered approaches, such as the Cure Violence model, limit or altogether exclude these systems and professionals from program activities. As evidenced by the various approaches taken by the cohort of PCCD’s FY 2019 Gun Violence Reduction Grant Program sites, communities can also employ a hybrid approach that blends these two approaches. (Note: A snapshot of how public health vs. public safety models overlap and differ is available in Appendix A.) Several individuals noted that PCCD is well-positioned to facilitate conversations among individuals working in the same areas/communities as well as statewide to help break down some of those barriers, identify common challenges across systems and sectors, and bring forward potential solutions in a common space.
- **Prevent straw purchases through enhanced notification and response protocols.** Luzerne County reported seeing an increase in the number of cases of straw purchasing (i.e., where an individual without a criminal record purchases a gun for an individual who is not legally able to purchase or possess a firearm). As one official noted, “Straw purchases are the biggest gun violence issue in the county.” The county’s team shared that straw purchases create a significant safety issue for law enforcement since firearms are being purchased for individuals who are not supposed to have them. The county said it would be helpful to receive notification of incidents when individuals are attempting to purchase multiple firearms at once. (Currently, this notification does not occur.)

APPENDIX A: Promising Gun Violence Prevention Models

- Street outreach and violence interruption (e.g., [Cure Violence](#), [hospital-based violence intervention programs](#), etc.);
- Focused deterrence programs, including [Group Violence Intervention \(GVI\)](#), and [Operation Ceasefire](#);
- Community-driven [crime prevention through environmental design \(CPTED\)](#);
- [Safe passages programs](#), which provide safe routes to and from schools in neighborhoods with high rates of gun violence;
- Pre-release interventions, services, and supports for individuals convicted of firearm-related offenses;
- Community-based cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and/or wraparound services for individuals at high risk for gun violence.

Figure 4. Elements of Cure Violence vs. Focused Deterrence¹³



Source: Research & Evaluation Center, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York.

Figure 5. Public Safety/Law Enforcement vs. Public Health Approach¹⁴

Public Safety / Focused Deterrence	STRATEGY	Public Health / Norm Change
Operation Ceasefire, Boston Gun Project, Group Violence Intervention, Chicago PSN	PROGRAM NAMES	Cure Violence, Chicago-CeaseFire, Safe Streets, Save Our Streets, TRUCE, Operation S.N.U.G.
Police, prosecutors, probation, parole, prisons. Social services, public health and faith partners. Outreach workers connect youth to jobs, school, etc.	KEY ELEMENTS	Staff include former offenders with neighborhood credibility ("violence interrupters", "credible messengers"). Social services, public health and faith partners. Outreach workers connect youth to jobs, school, etc.
Rely on authoritative legal/social/moral pressure. Cooperate closely and publicly with police. Focus on stopping most active groups/ individuals. Use offender "call-ins" to deter those active in violence.	MAIN TACTICS	Rely on confidential relationships with local residents. Limited cooperation with police; rarely in public. Focus on changing social norms re: violence. Use direct interruption, mediation of active disputes.

Quasi-experimental (non-RCT) studies. Strategy rated 'promising' (crimesolutions.gov) Meta-analytic review found 'moderate' positive effect. Boston program rated 'effective' (crimesolutions.gov)	CURRENT STATE OF EVIDENCE	Quasi-experimental (non-RCT) studies. Strategy rates 'promising' (crimesolutions.gov)
National Network for Safe Communities http://www.nnscommunities.org/	MORE INFO	Cure Violence – National Office http://cureviolence.org/

¹ Josiah Bates, [“2020 Ends as One of America’s Most Violent Years in Decades,”](#) *TIME Magazine*, December 30, 2020; [“2020 Was a Record-Breaking Year For Gun-Related Deaths In The U.S.,”](#) *NPR*, January 3, 2021; Reis Thebault and Danielle Rindler, [“Shootings never stopped during the pandemic: 2020 was the deadliest gun violence year in decades,”](#) *The Washington Post*, March 23, 2021; Chris Palmer, [“Philly’s violent year: Nearly 500 people were killed and more than 2,200 shot in 2020,”](#) *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 4, 2021.

² Reis Thebault and Danielle Rindler, [“Shootings never stopped during the pandemic: 2020 was the deadliest gun violence year in decades,”](#) *The Washington Post*, March 23, 2021

³ Chris Palmer, [“Philly’s violent year: Nearly 500 people were killed and more than 2,200 shot in 2020,”](#) *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 4, 2021.

⁴ Chris Palmer, [“Philly’s violent year: Nearly 500 people were killed and more than 2,200 shot in 2020,”](#) *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 4, 2021.

⁵ Rosenfeld, Richard, Thomas Abt and Ernesto Lopez. [Pandemic, Social Unrest, and Crime in U.S. Cities: 2020 Year-End Update.](#) Washington, D.C.: Council on Criminal Justice, January 2021.

⁶ Rosenfeld, Richard, Thomas Abt and Ernesto Lopez. [Pandemic, Social Unrest, and Crime in U.S. Cities: 2020 Year-End Update.](#) Washington, D.C.: Council on Criminal Justice, January 2021.

⁷ Champe Barton, Brian Freskos, and Daniel Nass, [“A Historic Surge in Gun Violence Compounds the Traumas of 2020,”](#) *The Trace*, December 21, 2020.

⁸ [Firearm Mortality by State](#), National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed April 21, 2021.

⁹ [2019 Firearms Annual Report](#), Pennsylvania State Police.

¹⁰ Data Source: Program data submitted by FY 2019 Gun Violence Reduction grantees via PCCD’s Egrants System.

¹¹ Data Source: Program data submitted by FY 2019 Gun Violence Reduction grantees via PCCD’s Egrants System.

¹² Data Source: Program data submitted by FY 2019 Gun Violence Reduction grantees via PCCD’s Egrants System.

¹³ Adapted from John Jay College of Criminal Justice, Research & Evaluation Center.

¹⁴ Adapted from John Jay College of Criminal Justice, Research & Evaluation Center.